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## **Sites of subversion: online political satire in two post-Soviet states**

### **Introduction**

This study investigates whether the Internet can become an effective tool for democratization and civic mobilization in a context where differentials in power relations are particularly sharp – the former Soviet Union. It offers the first two-way comparative study of new media's democratising potential in two post-Soviet states, Ukraine and Belarus. Despite their location at the geographical centre of Europe these countries are marked by a somewhat fragmented academic inquiry, as most of research scholarship is centred on Russia (Fossato, 2009; Dubin, 2008; Oates, 2013). The cases of Ukraine and Belarus can, however, be extremely informative regarding the usage of new media and their democratic potential in transitional societies. This is particularly true given the countries' diverging political pathways: Belarus is an authoritarian dictatorship or 'the last dictatorship of Europe' (Rausing, 2012) governed by President A. Lukashenko since 1994; Ukraine is an aspiring democracy, which potentially can be taken over by a creeping or competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. The comparison is particularly timely, not least given recent upheavals in Ukraine including the ousting of President Yanukovich and the annexation of Crimea by Russia (Harding, 2014).

The overarching goal of this article is to evaluate new media's role in generating a counter-force or an alternative public space in the so-called 'buffer zone' between the EU and Russia. The potential of new media in Ukraine and Belarus to foster civic engagement and social change can be assessed by investigating how citizens in these two countries use, produce and relate to political satire online. Specifically, this involves a number of tasks: (a) uncovering the emerging modes of usage of new media in semi/authoritarian states, (b) contextualizing how national socio-political systems shape the democratic potential of the new media architecture and (c) exploring the potential of new media for undercutting the existing status quo in the societies in question. Issues of broader concern are whether the Internet will be able to fill the democratic gap in

transitional semi/authoritarian states and whether it can challenge the norm of government control and self-censorship.

The focus on political satire is particularly instructive, as its subversive nature is mutable with regard to different governmental practices, historical contexts and media forms. Recent interaction of the genre with technology (online practices) produces further subtleties of expression. It not only explicates particular national sensibilities but also the nature of ironic 'resistance' within the national off- and on-line context. As a result, studying political satire online can reveal both sites of subversion and modes of usage of new media. The article starts with a brief overview of the nature of post-Soviet countries and an analysis of new media's democratic potential in the region. This is followed by a discussion of the post/Soviet legacy of political satire and an introduction to the study's methodological approach. Then the case studies of online political satire in Ukraine and Belarus are presented and analysed. The conclusion problematizes the findings and outlines future directions for scholarly inquiry.

### **Contextualising the study**

The role of new media, which were expected to become a leading force in the transformation process in semi/authoritarian states, has yet to receive a full assessment. Among factors preventing successful development of an engaged online community in the region is the transitional (or 'adjusting' as Dubin (2008) puts it) nature of the post-Soviet societies. The essentially horizontal communication network galvanized by the rise of the Internet requires a corresponding vertical structure of credible institutions, which is missing in the region. The countries in question simulate the institutions and processes of the democratic model; to use Wilson's terminology (1995) they are close to 'virtual democracies'. My focus on new media's role in democratic development foregrounds pluralism and civil society building, omitting democracy's other 'building blocks' such as contested elections, separation of powers, rule of law, etc.

State control over traditional media and media self-censorship are pervasive in the region, with the exception of Ukraine, which maintains relative pluralism among traditional media outlets (Dyczok 2009). Such socio-political environments, combined

with the low-cost ability of the Internet to aggregate interest groups, make online platforms (almost) the only available/remaining public space to exercise local governance and counteract the forces blocking democratization.<sup>2</sup> However, opportunities transpiring from new media's horizontal (hence in theory more inclusive) architecture go hand in hand with the challenges of the new media infrastructure.

Among limitations to online engagement are low Internet penetration and high cost of Internet usage. These vary from country to country: in 2012, allegedly, approximately half of the 9.7 million population of Belarus uses the Internet (47%). In Ukraine users total 34% among the population of over 45 million, but only large cities boast high numbers (Freedom House, 2013). In both countries, it is predominantly a young to middle-aged, urban, educated and relatively well-off cohort that seems to benefit most from ICTs. This is especially the case as the Internet becomes more accessible and affordable via mobile devices. For instance, 36% of Ukraine's urban population accesses the Internet via a mobile phone or smartphone (Kievstar, 2013). The current rate of approximately 24% of Belarusian mobile Internet users is expected to grow rapidly as the 3G standard becomes more affordable (Pet'ko, 2013). Despite 'uneven' Internet penetration (the rural vs. urban divide) and its relative affordability, it can be considered a 'mass' medium in both countries.

However, digital divides in these countries are more complex than that. The fall of the USSR resulted in peculiar attitudes towards democratic values<sup>3</sup>, which can translate into low online activism and a narrow set of issues of public concern. Online practices should be placed in the context of the post-Soviet legacy, in which personal networks are generally deemed more important (Ledeneva, 1998) than governmental or even civic organisations. As a result patterns of Internet usage are embedded within informal offline networks. Online users tend to seek (legal, etc.) advice via established informal networks and to engage in discussions within confined online circles<sup>4</sup>. The practices and tools taken up by networked individuals are constrained further by weak civil society, which manifests itself in self-censorship and mistrust<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the growing fragmentation and atomisation of post-Soviet subjects exerts an impact on online civic engagement in the region.

An additional dilemma related to the democratising potential of the Internet is its regulation. The ecology of freedom of expression online is changing and at times it can be enhanced/eroded *indirectly* by the pursuit of other goals in wider society. It can be triggered by user-centred or net-centred concerns, as well as by various stakeholders' interests (Dutton et. al., 2011). In semi/authoritarian states the establishment of firm control over all forms of information flows is an ultimate goal. These governments embark on a defensive strategy, adopting stringent legislation, securing centralised access and control over external connections. According to the latest Freedom House report (2013:8) Ukraine and Belarus have adopted the SORM ICT monitoring system used in Russia and subsequently introduced legislation expanding their surveillance powers.

The situation, however, is far from straightforward. Semi-authoritarian states are using more and more sophisticated methods of control over the Internet. In addition to the first generation of control mechanisms (such as surveillance of internet cafes and filtering), they now employ more sophisticated tools. The second generation of control includes the use of a legal and normative environment to block access to information, as argued by Deibert and Rohozinski (2010). One of the most recent examples of this approach in Belarus is a 2010 regulation 'obliging compulsory registration of all websites and the collection of personal data in Belarus' (EDRI-gram, 2010). Third-generation mechanisms include 'active surveillance and data mining' (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010:27), as well as state-sponsored information campaigns encompassing dissemination of propaganda, *kompromat* (compromising material) and disinformation online. In other words, it involves the use of new media by the state both for crude and *subversive* propaganda.

Some of these 'subversive' tactics involve dissemination of images of stability and promotion of affordable (or free) entertainment, such as access to the latest films or TV shows online. In addition to the infotainment tactic, cyberspace can be used to evoke a feeling of affinity with the regime via subtle or indirect promotion of a pro-state agenda (sometimes with the help of satirical genre as an example in the next section clarifies). It can be used as a tool for managed dissent as well. The latter tactic presupposes certain toleration of critical viewpoints disseminated online, going beyond what is permitted on air. By providing a monitored online space for a public 'outburst', the regime ensures that

it does not spill offline, pinpoints the relevant ‘hot-spots’ and encourage ‘slacktivism’, a feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact (Morozov, 2011).

Subversive online manoeuvres can be practiced by various actors. The cases of grassroots online political satire discussed in the article explicate the difficulties involved in controlling information flows online and contextualize challenges to semi-authoritarian governments seeking to maintain control over media output and reception. First, however, I will briefly outline the Soviet legacy regarding the production and consumption of political satire.

### **(Post)Soviet political satire**

The broad notion of satire can be defined as a rhetorical strategy which employs ridicule, irony and other means to offer social criticism and potentially trigger an improvement of individuals, societies, etc. (Elliot, 2004). It can be seen as a force that is potentially able to challenge the status quo, so it is feared by those in power. Jesters and fools were among the first representatives of political satire (Lerner, 2009; Partan, 2007) as they openly articulated grassroots dissent towards ‘rulers’ in a mocking, provocative and/or ironic manner. In a way, it is similar to Bakhtinian carnival (1981), which inverts rules and traditions and opens space for ‘low’ culture, thus implicitly questioning power relations. This indirect ‘confrontation’ with and subversive resistance to authority via playful, ironic and attention-grabbing satire engenders support among the ‘demos’. Furthermore, this ‘comic over-exaggeration’ can potentially transform the passive recipient of a satirical message into a ‘potential actor’ (Knight, 2008:104), as dispersed individuals identify common ground and may unify into a politicised community (Day, 2011:145). Online political satire is a manifestation of participatory popular culture which, by employing an ironic strategy online, is capable of revealing shared understandings of inner ideological contradictions and can therefore potentially challenge established power structures.

Political satire had a long tradition in the USSR permeating a number of genres. Despite censorship, surveillance and the threat of prosecution, the culture of political satire in the form of a short story/joke with a punch line or *anekdot* proliferated during

the Soviet period. It remains popular to this day, as numerous websites aggregating old and new *anekdoty* indicate (anekdot.ru, anekdotov.net, etc.). Some other cases of political satire included literary satirists (M. Zoshchenko, M. Bulgakov and others), popular comedians (e.g. M. Zhvanetsky, A. Raikin, etc.), satirical comedy/short film series (e.g. the satirical TV journal *Fitil*, Fuse; the film from the 1920s called *Tret'ia Meshchanskaia*, Three in Bed) and magazines (*Krokodil*, Crocodile). In a more or less unified ideological realm of the Soviet Union, comedians often relied on the public's ability and inclination to 'read between the lines' and resorted to subversive use of state propaganda and subtle jokes such as playing on their over-exaggerated devotion to the party line bordering on *steb*. Following Yurchak, *steb* is a 'form of irony that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision, or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor' (2006: 250). What makes *steb* slightly different from sarcasm is the ambivalence of irony displayed, as one is left to wonder whether the ironic aesthetic practice is a support, ridicule or mixture of the two. After fall of the USSR a number of changes in political satire occurred. The case of post-soviet Russia is used here to highlight them. Proliferation of new satirical programmes employing various genres was one of the transformations (e.g. a political puppet TV show called *Kukly* or Puppets (1994-2002), the Russian equivalent of the UK's *Spitting Image*, by the scriptwriter Viktor Shenderovich, and a computer-animated show *Tushite Svet* (Switch off the light), 2000-2004). However, these shows were later cancelled and replaced with more apolitical stand-up comedians such as E. Petrosian, M. Galkin and the *Novye Russkie Babki* (Beumers et. al. 2008:45) as well as quasi-satirical programmes.

One of the most recent examples of quasi-satire is the show *Mul'tichnosti* (Cartoon personalities) broadcast on the mainstream state television Channel One and available online (on the Channel's official website, YouTube, etc.). This cartoon (2009-2013) featured various political and celebrity figures from both the national and international scene. In one of the most popular episodes puppets representing Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev are dancing and singing satirical verses (known as *chastushki*) as a 2010 New Year message to the nation. Interestingly, the abovementioned show *Kukly* was closed in 2002 precisely for political satire involving Putin's puppet. *Mul'tichnosti* used a similar plot for its New Year episodes in 2011 and 2012, which enjoyed similar popularity (Putin and Medvedev, 2012).

This attempt by the Russian state to use the Internet to expand its communicative power and shape popular opinion was only partially successful. As a case of state-sanctioned satire, *Mul'tlichnosti* received quite a mixed welcome online. Here I quote only some of the critical comments on the Channel One website: *cheap product; The programme is so boring. Everything is so stretched, flat and over-used; Undeniably, this is an ideological weapon/an illusion of democracy/a very useful maneuver/an example of stupidity and idiocy! As it was shown at Channel One, it was sanctioned by his Majesty(ies) (!)*(Pervyi kanal, n.d.). Thus, by creating an online archive of *Mul'tlichnosti* cartoons and encouraging forum discussion, the state uses media convergence (as well as the fact that TV still remains the most popular media in the region) as a tool to co-opt alternative voices and to authenticate official meanings.

Following the introduction of quasi-satire and the general de-politicization of traditional media in the post-Soviet region,<sup>6</sup> political satire mostly proliferates online. Besides the popularity of satirical items originating in the Soviet era (such as *Krokodil*, which is now available online), there is a continuation of the post/Soviet satirical legacy online albeit in a different form and genre. For instance, Ryazanova-Clarke establishes that a series of blogs display a generic connection with both the 1990s television show *Kukly* and the satirical Soviet TV journal *Fitil* (2010). However, it is difficult to comment on generational differences in attitude towards this and other cases of online political satire mentioned here due to the lack of available data.

As a recent report shows, 'the explosion in political satire' (Kovalev, 2011) means that it is becoming more and more difficult for the Russian state to regulate its production and dissemination. The establishment risks losing control over 'multiple readings' of released 'state-authorised' images and other artefacts. As the case of grassroots ironical alteration of bare-chested photographs of Putin illustrates, online political satire is at times able to 'contaminate' the dominant state-sanctioned viewpoint. After this short account of subversive potential of political satire in Russia I will now turn to the neighbouring Belarus and Ukraine. I will explicate how citizens in these countries relate to political satire online and whether the new media can become an alternative public space in this 'borderland' between the EU and Russia.



## Methodology

The socio-cultural and historical context of political humour outlined above raises a number of questions. How do citizens use, produce and relate to online political satire in Ukraine and Belarus? What can the case of online political satire tell us about civic grassroots activism in the region? Are incumbent regimes successful in manipulating, assimilating various satirical voices and/or pushing them to the margins? How do the states in question (i) address an implicit 'Other/s' in online communication and (ii) attempt to accommodate the ideological 'Other' online (in order to invalidate it)?

This study adopts an issue driven approach. It looks at the most prominent cases of political satire as they emerge online (in blogs, on social networking sites, etc.). The cases of political satire (relevant for the Ukrainian and Belarusian community) have been identified based on the researcher's knowledge of the region and media monitoring (such as tracking viral satirical videos, images, and memes). The most prominent cases are analysed against other user-generated content on the issue (such as comments) and reaction from the state (where applicable). I examine the linguistic and visual aspects of online political satire, as well as identify patterns of development of political satire in the post-Soviet region.

The audience of online satire in the region can be described as relatively young, urban, educated, well-off and politically engaged. Having said that, the growing affordability of mobile internet and the rapidly changing political environment (for instance, public dissatisfaction with the abrupt reversal of European integration and a wave of protests started on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2013 in Kiev called *Euromaidan*) have dramatically increased both the 'reach' and appeal of online satire and ironic resistance. Furthermore, distribution of political satire via traditional media channels (DVDs, etc.) ensures wider dissemination and diversifies its potential audience. Where possible, deliberation about the 'creators' of online satire is offered. Obviously, it is not always viable to establish precisely who is generating the satire. However, it is possible to comment on whose political/social interests the satire represents. Some of the examples discussed below indicate that satirical outputs might be predominantly targeting a male

audience, playing on gender stereotypes of quasi-modern Ukrainian and Belarusian society.

The longitudinal analysis of online political satire in two states embraces a 10-year span (2004-2013). During this time, the political environment endured certain alterations, especially in Ukraine, where the Orange revolution's president Viktor Yushchenko was succeeded by a more pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich. (Although recent political upheaval in Ukraine such as Euromaidan, ousting of V. Yanukovich, military conflict in some parts of Ukraine and election of the new president—Petro Poroshenko, go beyond the scope of this analysis I will briefly reflect on the types of political satire they inspired). The degree of media freedom in both countries also fluctuated. The recent decline in media freedom (including the Internet) in Ukraine from 'free' to 'partly free' (Freedom House, 2013a) is useful in clarifying the findings (and trends). In turn, technical attacks against alternative media websites, arrests of bloggers and prosecution of media practitioners in Belarusian 'not free' mediascape (Freedom House, 2013b) help contextualise the findings further.

The analysis is structured as follows. Firstly, the type of 'alternative' satirical content available online within the ten year period in each state is surveyed. The modes of use and fluctuation in popularity of certain types of satire are explained. Finally, this analysis is contextualised within the wider context of media convergence, information flows and different governments' approaches to managing online political satire.

## **Online political satire in two post-Soviet states**

### **Ukraine**

In contrast to the Russian 'state-sanctioned' satirical cartoons mentioned above, the Ukrainian online sphere has generated similar initiatives from below. Such factors as diverse media ownership, a more pluralistic political environment and charismatic political figures have been conducive for this. A series of politically themed cartoons were triggered by events during the 2004 presidential campaign, when one of the

presidential candidates (V. Yanukovych) had an egg thrown at him and tumbled to the ground. The cartoon *Veseli Yaytsia* (Merry Eggs) created by a former military interpreter and Ukrainian consul to Israel, Dmitry Chekalkin, was extremely popular during the campaign (Kuzio, 2006). It featured two eggs telling jokes and singing. Another creation from the same author was a thirteen-episode Internet film inspired by Yanukovych's misspelling of his former vocation (*Operation ProFFessor*) comprising clips from popular Soviet comedies and impersonating well-known national politicians.

In this and other instances discussed below it is quite difficult to establish the popularity of online satire. In some cases the number of viewings, re-postings or commentaries might be informative. However, in 2004 Internet accessibility was quite limited and dissemination of political satire involved traditional media (e.g. *Operation ProFFessor* was predominantly disseminated via DVDs as the first comment under the clip indicates: *Veseli Yaytsia: Operatsiia Proffessor* (9-15 series) (n.d.)). Moreover, the ephemerality of new media and varying degrees of control over online output mean that some of the satirical products are no longer available online (e.g. a website containing *anekdoty* about Yanukovych called [yanukovych.nm.ru](http://yanukovych.nm.ru)) or have been reposted (e.g. some of the YouTube clips were removed but later on re-uploaded, thus distorting the accuracy of viewing counts). Therefore, where possible, the nature of the establishment's response (i.e. prosecution of authors, censorship of items, etc.) to cases of online political satire is used here to draw inferences about their popularity.

Alongside these cartoons, other satirical political parodies gained high ratings. They included 'projects' involving Yulia Tymoshenko (especially during her time as prime-minister in 2005 and then after 2007). Some of the satirical images made fun of her hair style (a French plait) which was presented as a tool of torture (a means to hang a person/country), a halo, a moustache, a symbol of a loaf of bread or an emblem of the USSR, etc. (Yulia Tymoshenko's plait, 2011; Photozhaba on Yulia Tymoshenko, n.d.). As the only prominent female politician in Ukrainian quasi-patriarchal society Tymoshenko is an easy target of satire. Even during her imprisonment (2011-2014) she remained a fruitful source for political jokes (e.g. a series of cartoons depicting her 'luxurious' life in prison is presumably promoted by her political rivals). One of the most

popular episodes has had more than 450,000 views since May 2012 (Yulia Tymoshenko v kolonii, 2012).

The change of political climate (such as the decline of support for the Orange Revolution) increased the popularity of another cartoon, Mr. Freeman. It originates in Ru-net (Russian internet) and deals with a wide range of everyday issues, problematizing citizens' duties and responsibilities. A series of black and white cartoons featuring Mr. Freeman narrating in a monologue that first appeared on YouTube in 2009 and has continued (albeit with some irregularity) to date. Due to its popularity it was dubbed into Ukrainian in 2010. However, recent 'success stories' of online political satire go beyond cartoons. The emergence of fake accounts of politicians on the most famous part of the blogosphere—Livejournal—constitute another type of viral satire. The parodical appropriation of the identity of N. Azarov (Prime Minister 2010-2014) is a prominent example.

Currently, the most engaging types of political satire among the online community involve genres which require little time for production and consumption. They are so-called *photozhaby* or *Photo Toads* (creative digital alteration of images). This trend is similar to one in Belarus discussed below. Their main 'heroes' (similarly to the cartoons) are national political figures such as V. Yanukovich (e.g. an accident with the wreath falling on the president during an official ceremony in 2010) or Y. Tymoshenko during different stages of her political career.

Alongside the diversification of grassroots political satire online, its commercialization and potential de-politicisation are also taking place. Citizen-driven online satirical activism is now aligning with commercial political projects. One example is the project *Paraska Info*, which was inspired by an Orange Revolution supporter called Paraska (an old lady who became a symbol of the revolution and subsequently a member of the party 'Our Ukraine'), but later on became part of the political establishment. Online competitions for the best satirical image announced by some portals have followed a similar trend. However, an easier production and dissemination of any satirical output online (*anekdot*, video, photo, etc.) can turn activism into merely a 'virtual struggle'. One instance when online satirical engagement becomes more alluring and can potentially substitute offline involvement is the web project (a website-

aggregator) called *Durdom* or Madhouse, which had four million visits in 2012 (Butchenko, 2013). A slightly different route was adopted by D. Chekalkin who has recently branched out into a realm of wider satire. Now the creator of *Merry Eggs* states that ‘the novelty of overtly political content’ wore off, and Ukrainians need an apolitical humour (Chekalkin, 2009).

The factor of media convergence should be taken into account, as in many cases online activists use official TV footage (e.g. the incident with the wreath falling on the president) as inspiration for their satire. Other (offline) artifacts can also inform them, such as images of a Ukrainian graffiti artist known as Ukrainian Banksy. The transnational cultural flow complicates the dynamic further: examples include Ukrainian politicians being represented as Disney cartoon characters (Sukhomlin, n.d.) and the influence of Ru-net (Mr. Freeman cartoon).

After the 2010 presidential elections the state moved towards cruder media control (to ensure ownership over definitions), which has manifested in overt pressure on the most active bloggers. For example, bloggers who published a mocking video of the wreath incident were firmly advised to delete it. Despite tightening of media regulations, new cases of online political satire emerge now and then. One example is a Facebook group called The Church of Witnesses of Improvement (*Tserkov’ Svidetelei Pokrasheniya*), which posts satirical pictures in response to current political events. However, as its organiser wished to remain anonymous, it illustrates the trend towards increasing self-censorship in Ukrainian society (Butchenko, 2013).

There have also been attempts to appropriate the tools of counter-discourse proliferating online, just as in Russia, where a ‘safer’ version of political satire—*Mul’tichnosti*—was created. However, these attempts do not come from the regime. Rather, they are triggered by the nature of Ukraine’s political establishment, which is based on competition between various political groupings and a desire to discredit opponents. One recent example is the satirical cartoon Fairy-tail Rus’ (*Skazochnaya Rus’*) created by the Kvartal-95 group and broadcast on TV channel 1+1 (this channel, which is owned by tycoon I.V. Kolomoyskyi, covers 95% of the state’s territory and typically comes second in popularity ratings). Among its characters it features then President Yanukovich who wears a track suit, a surzhik-speaking (mixed Russian and Ukrainian

language) Prime-Minister Azarov and an imprisoned Tymoshenko. The cartoon boosted the rating of the channel and the TV programme (*Vechernij Kiev*) on which it was broadcast. Some of the episodes boast high popularity online (Butchenko, 2013).

Ukrainian new media enjoy relative freedom compared to their counterparts in Belarus and Russia. This is reflected in the proliferation of political satire and online activism driven by (recent) political events. The abundance of the graffiti during Euromaidan (Strokan, 2013), images involving Tymoshenko; dark humour on Yanukovich and Special Forces; and other numerous examples (Facebook, 2013; Miller, 2014) will constitute fruitful grounds for future research. On the basis of pre-Euromaidan events the following deductions are in order. On the one hand, the introduction of recent overt controls in the Ukrainian online mediascape indicates the state's desire to control diversity among voices online. On the other hand, subversive control is somewhat withheld, as the regime might be considering the pros and cons of such a policy and the dangers of appropriating oppositional satire for the system. In other words, it might be easier to accommodate the ideological 'Other' online (in order to invalidate it) by using familiar strategies: infotainment, commercialisation and competition, simultaneously allowing a plurality of voices and triggering further fragmentation of the online community. It remains to be seen what tactics the new establishment under the leadership of P. Poroshenko will pursue in response to the enduring grassroots online political satire.

## **Belarus**

State control over the media in Belarus is much more pronounced than in Russia or Ukraine. During the last ten years it has included such stringent measures as a requirement to show ID in order to browse the Internet in public cyber cafes and equating the idea of flash mobs (organised via the Internet) with picketing (Russia Today, 2011). State regulation of traditional media ranges from overt controls (such as selected censorship of Russian TV channels) to covert ones. One recent example was the introduction of a short-lived satirical show *Kuhnia* (Kitchen) before the 2010 elections. The show, which is extremely similar to Russia's *Projektorperishilton* (n.d.), played on the Soviet phenomenon of *kuhnia*, where people could discuss with friends recent

political affairs and tell anecdotes in private. Its cloned format and contrived existence is spelled out by commentators in online articles (Ganevich, 2010; Petrovskaya, 2010). Like Russian *Mul'tlichnosti*, such state-sanctioned political satire imposed from the top is perceived as reinforcing certain political viewpoints and failing to work.

Even in this climate (or in spite of it) one can observe sporadic manifestations of political satire online. One of the most prominent cases of grassroots political satire in Belarus is a series of cartoons *Multclub* (2005) created by Oleg Minich and a group of activists called Third Way Community. They featured a number of political leaders, predominantly national actors (rather than foreign politicians or celebrity figures as in *Mul'tlichnosti*). The cartoons were deliberately made in a crude amateur-like animation form, linking them to homely low-tech contemporary art. They were welcomed and virally spread by various means (such as Internet, DVDs, flash drives, etc.) but not extensively commented on by the online community. As government pressure on the cartoon creator increased (he was threatened with imprisonment) he left the country for Western Europe (Grekov, 2013).

Other viral online satire of that time was text-based, such as the hip-hop poem 'Zianon' (named after an oppositional figure particularly influential in Belarus right after the collapse of the USSR, who is now exiled). Grasping the radical indeterminacy of new media, the author/s of the poem played with the sub-culture of hip-hop (perceived to be a dynamic and/or alien influence within the highly homogenous state-controlled cultural realm) in order to strengthen its rebellious potential and increase its authenticating force. On the one hand, the fact that it is no longer available online indicates that its subversive power was acknowledged by the regime. On the other hand, lack of any documented proof makes it impossible to estimate its popularity (at that time).

Other cases of bottom-up online participation include the animated duet of *Sasha i Siarozha* (a project of two famous musicians) and *Belzhaba* (Belarusian toad), which contains a selection of ironical (digitally altered) photographs related to current socio-economic and political affairs and actors. For a number of years these projects struggled to survive, as they tended to be temporarily blocked (e.g. during election campaigns). Currently the archive of *Belzhaba* is no longer available and the website exists only as a

Twitter feed. The same fate was encountered by a vast number of other developments or portals hosting political satire which are no longer available online.

As in Ukraine, online satirical activism in Belarus is prone to fluctuations with occasional peaks triggered by various political events. The most prominent cases of recent online civic activity are related to political events (the legitimacy of national elections in 2010 and the suppression of peaceful demonstrations during that electoral campaign) and the economic situation (rampant inflation and difficulties acquiring foreign currency for members of the general public). During the increase in grassroots activism which preceded the 2010 election, a satirical video by Ya. Shapchyts entitled 'Hide your grandmother's passport' became extremely popular on Bynet (Belarusian internet). One of its YouTube versions called '*Babushka*' (Grandma) has around 63 000 views (Babushka, 2010). The video played on the manipulation of elderly people's votes and the title hints at a way of tackling it. Consistent with the state line, the video's producer and one of its young actors were identified and forced from their jobs (an employee of Belarusian TV and a university drama coach respectively (Actor, 2010)).

Despite the diversity of genres, the dynamic of online political satire production in Belarus has been gradually changing. More explicit and crude suppression of online activism, growing depoliticisation and self-censorship are reflected in the dearth of cases of satire. Furthermore, lack of resources results in substandard quality of output: e.g. a lacklustre cartoon by Minich called New Year wishes (New cartoon, 2011) had 70,000 viewings on YouTube (Grekov, 2013). As in Ukraine (albeit for slightly different reasons which are mentioned above), there is a trend towards simplification of satirical tools: from more complex, time- and resource-consuming cartoons to satirical images which can be quickly produced singlehandedly by an IT-savvy user who cannot be very easily traced (one of the most recent cases is a collection 'Something is not right', 2014). Another trend, which can also be observed in Ukraine, is the emergence of various aggregators, websites where various humorous photos, videos, articles are collected. For instance, the Live Journal webpage *Belpomoechka* (Belarusian Trash) contains videos, photos of real life events, official propaganda posters, etc. The imagery might not be digitally altered but it was posted precisely because it contains certain ambiguity and it can be 'read' in a subversive way (By\_Trash, n.d.)).



This echoes the Soviet phenomenon of *steb*, mentioned above, as a way to deal with increasing self/censorship. Some projects tend to exaggerate their loyalty to the regime to the extent that it becomes dubious (e.g. a series of recent flash mobs organised via the internet, where people on the streets were praising the president). To some extent a project called *Lu-net* plays along similar lines. It creates a whole parallel internet which is supposed to celebrate the regime and serve as its mouthpiece. This 'present' for the president's 53rd birthday consisted of four 'services': a video sharing site (LuTube), a search engine (Lundex), a blogging service (LuJournal) and a web portal (tut.lu) (Doroshevich, 2007). The ambiguity of online satirical messages means that political satire exists despite /due to the highly controlled media environment.

Despite ongoing suppression of alternative media, the state's control does not seem to be pervasive and all-encompassing. Several traditional media outlets that were banned have moved online, such as *34magazine* and the newspaper *Navinki*. The title of the later outlet is based on a wordplay: news (*novost'*), the popular independent newspaper *Naviny*, and a satellite town of Minsk, *Navinki*, where a psychiatric hospital is located. The paper existed from 1998 to 2005, but from 2003 had to publish illegally. Before the 2010 elections the project was revived and found its new life online on LiveJournal (Bykovsky, 2010). The question of why these outlets are granted 'second life' online is open to speculation. Whether they are meant to be a 'safety valve' as outlets of 'managed dissent', or a convenient opportunity to monitor grassroots' activism, remains to be seen.

As in Ukraine, media content convergence is evident in the production of political satire. It ranges from extensive use of the Russian language to the 'appropriation' of imagery from Ru-net. Exposure to wider media flows is clear in manipulation of globally circulated images. For instance, the blogger E. Lipkovich published a photo of the band Rammstein from *Kerrang* magazine with the blogger inserted on the far right with a black censure tape across his eyes and the head of the Union of Writers, M. Charhinets, on the far left of the photo. Access to his blog was temporarily blocked (Photozhaba, 2011) and he faced criminal charges for desecrating a flag, which were later dropped. Allegedly, anonymous pranksters originally superimposed the face of the head of the Union of Writers onto that of a Rammstein member and changed the flag. One motivation was that

Charhinets, who is also in charge of the country's Public Morality Council, considered banning Rammstein's performance in Minsk (Khvoin, 2012). Diverse members of the online audience would pick up on different subtleties of satirical expression in this particular meme (referring us to a broader issue, the critical audience).

Clearly, the Belarusian state tends to use overt control mechanisms to address the implicit 'Other/s' in online communication. Ongoing monitoring of the Internet as a realm of political dissent has ranged from multilevel-routine search (certain words) to tracing users online, from monitoring in cybercafés to identifying and intimidating online activists (blogger Lipkovich, others.). It has resulted in the fragmentation of oppositional forces and a barren Internet landscape. Furthermore, pre-emptive surveillance or the omnipresent threat of penetration of 'resistance' circles enforces self-censorship among active members of the online community. As a result, the state neither makes nor needs to make attempts to accommodate the satirical 'Other' online in order to invalidate it. Thus, the democratic potential of the Internet is subverted by the state at a very early stage, as the potential of the Internet to promote democracy is hindered from the outset.

Finally, it should be noted that the regime has gradually adopted a wider variety of methods of covert control (mostly outside the online sphere). It has moved beyond simple denial of the need to internalise peripheral voices (their suppression, as in the case of the 'grassroots' cartoon/ists) to more subtle strategies, such as accounting for alternative narratives (e.g. co-opting rock musicians or launching the quasi-satirical show *Kuhnja* mentioned above). Interestingly, this approach was introduced retroactively to create an illusion of a plurality of voices, rather than proactively as in Russia, to preempt the emergence of alternative narratives and 'occupy' available public space. It seems that no matter how much control is exerted over new media, global media flows (e.g. scenes of the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan in Kiev) cannot be suppressed and other sources of subversive protest (e.g. involving *steb*) cannot be ignored. As Soviet-style crude suppression of dissenting voices does not work, the regime attempts to diversify its tactics in dealing with political satire.

## **Conclusion**

The investigation of the issues raised in this article is instructive for our understanding of the dynamics of control and the democratising potential of the online sphere in societies with semi/authoritarian regimes. It draws our attention to the fluidity of state strategies in dealing with new media and adopting more sophisticated control mechanisms. It highlights the possibilities and evaluates the dangers of appropriating online space(s) and *de-legitimising* the nature of freedom of expression online. Diverse regime tactics are observed in both the countries studied: predominantly crude policing and marginalisation of peripheral online voices in Belarus; more sophisticated control in Ukraine. Imposed obstacles for production and dissemination of political satire, constrain the diversity and sustainability of satirical projects in Belarus, as well as limit their topics (e.g. the mostly anti-presidential theme of the satire). Meanwhile, the relative freedom of the Ukrainian mediascape results in more diverse cases of political satire, which involve the appropriation of various genres and aesthetics, as well as gradual de-politicisation.

In semi-authoritarian states the Internet can potentially offer an alternative space outside the restricted political public sphere. By embracing a wider range of voices, new media acquire the dual potential *to challenge* and/or *authenticate* the state's ideological line. This article's focus on the former reveals the following. In the case of Ukraine, the maximum flexibility of discourse enabled by new media works *against* consolidation of civic society as it prompts its fragmentation and virtualization. The online environment in Belarus demonstrates the limitations of *discursive inconsistency* and *plurality* online and questions the role of alternative channels for the public's tongue-in-cheek political communication.

In both cases, online satire creates an 'illusory' democracy. Although the alternative voices are present, they are marginalised. As access to online resources in these countries is still limited, with TV remaining the main source of information, political satire online preaches to the 'converted'. The expanding powers of state surveillance contribute to (offline) intimidation of the producers of political satire and promote a general sense of panopticon and pervasive self-censorship. In the Belarusian case this is especially evident, as the alternative voices are intimidated, weakened and disjointed. The third-generation controls in Ukraine are combined with pluralism and competition within the Ukrainian media cloud, which results in the proliferation of various voices and their

subsequent fragmentation, with some of them lost and ignored. In both cases, state control over the Internet affects grassroots political satire. This might lead to further depoliticisation of online satire. Alternatively, it might result in more subversive use of new media by various online activists (similar to the already mentioned Soviet practice of *steb*) or a so-called ‘virtual struggle’—in Morozov’s terms, something close to ‘slacktivism’ (2011).

Finally, the global media-sphere of which both countries are part is a constant source of alternative narratives. This factor should also be taken into account. In the age of media convergence, relationships between new and old media, global and local, are becoming more and more complex. This ever increasing complexity of information flows is bound to multiply contradictions and intensify multi-directional intercultural dialogue of imagery and texts. All parties involved (the state, grassroots actors, etc.) have to constantly address these multiple (transnational) flows of meaning and online discourses. During this process they might become internally and multiply fractured, (as in the example involving Yanukovich’s imagery where the leader of the nation cannot control the meanings linked to his image, thus losing his ‘authority’ and slipping from his/her ‘pedestal’). Whether this process results in some sort of ‘sustainable pluralism’ (thus preventing further de-legitimisation of the nature of freedom of expression online in semi-authoritarian states) remains an open question.

The findings of this article contribute to our understanding of new media’s potential for the (co)production of citizenship. The following conclusion can be drawn regarding the conditions under which the Internet becomes an effective tool for democratization and civic mobilization. In both country cases, the points at which relatively passive networks of individuals are galvanized into particular online action (both producing and consuming political satire online) are triggered by ‘extraordinary’ events in the offline world, such as the dispersal of demonstrations in Belarus and the egging of the presidential candidate in Ukraine. It is equally if not more important to consider how ‘online events’ (such as satirical scandals) trigger ‘offline events’, such as meaningful acts of resistance and/or the creation of new solidarities. This aspect of the dynamic between off- and online civic and political engagement should be pursued further. So far, one cannot claim that new media are fostering the gradual (and organic) accumulation of grassroots initiatives into a

more engaged and networked public space. Likewise, there is no guarantee of straightforward progression from having an aspiration or point of view informed and inspired by online satire to acting on it (Day, 2011:146). Future research should look into these dilemmas, which hold not only for semi-authoritarian states but are also valid for consolidated democracies.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom House rankings in 2009 (1-7 scale, 7 is not free) were 6.5 in Belarus and 4.39 for Ukraine. Their rankings in 2013 were the following: Belarus remained on the same level of 'not free' (with score 6.5) and Ukraine's score decreased to 3.5 (partly free).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. an online public protest after the unfair use of force by traffic police leading to a successful offline campaign in Belarus (Lobodenko and Kozlik, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Semetko and Krasnoboka (2003:79) state that 'while democratic principles, norms and procedures may be admired, the political party, a primary institutional feature of established democracies, is not'.

<sup>4</sup> Fossato et al. (2008) found the following patterns within online media in Russia (which currently is 'fail[ing]' to mobilize the masses): 1) "[the] information mobilizes mainly closed clusters of like-minded users who only on rare occasions are able and willing to cooperate with other groups" (53); 2) the online media also suffer from increasing self-censorship, as the individuals often are contacted by Russian state officials and pressured to conform to 'rules'.

<sup>5</sup> Fossato et al. (2008) states that the online media also suffer from increasing self-censorship, as the individuals often are contacted by Russian state officials and pressured to conform to 'rules'.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. the closure of political shows such as *Vremena* (Miazhevich, 2012) and even 'state-endorsed' programmes such as *Prozhektorperishilton*, 2008-2012 (Taratuta, 2005), an analogue of British *Have I Got News for You*.

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